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## Dimensions of Acculturative Stress and Mexican American Emerging Adults' Prosocial Behaviors

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### Abstract

Stressful experiences are demanding and can weaken coping mechanisms and lead to maladjustment (Conger et al., 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Mexican Americans face unique forms of stressors, including acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is defined as demands placed on the individual that result from adapting to a new culture (Alegria & Woo, 2009). Acculturative stress is multidimensional and can be conceptualized in different ways. Language is a salient component of everyday life and may contribute to acculturative stress among Mexican Americans. Specifically, language can be potentially stressful for emerging adults who speak English as a second language and have difficulty communicating with others. Additionally, emerging adults may feel that they have access to fewer opportunities than their European American peers because of their ethnicity. Emerging adults who believe that society excludes them based on their ethnicity may experience environmental stress, another dimension of acculturative stress. Acculturative stress has been linked to a variety of behavioral outcomes, including prosocial behaviors, which are positive actions intended to benefit others. Prior research has demonstrated that acculturative stress is positively associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors but is negatively associated with other forms (McGinley et al., 2010). Furthermore, while researchers have examined different components of acculturative stress, it is unclear if these dimensions differentially impact different types of prosocial behaviors.

The current study examined the relations between two dimensions of acculturative stress (language stress and environmental stress) and Mexican American emerging adults' prosocial behaviors (dire, emotional, compliant, altruistic, anonymous, and public). Data was collected from Mexican American emerging adults in California and Texas. Participants were Mexican American college students (mean age=23.05 years, range 18-30 years; 66.9% female). Participants completed measures of their acculturative stress (Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale; Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987).

For the current study, the existing environmental stress subscale (10 items;  $\alpha=.85$ ) was used to assess stress associated with perceptions of limited opportunities and social exclusion. A language stress subscale (3 items;  $\alpha=.73$ ) was created to assess stress associated with communication. Regressions were conducted to examine the associations among language and environmental stress and six types of prosocial behaviors. The results demonstrated that language stress positively predicted anonymous prosocial behaviors and negatively predicted altruistic

prosocial behaviors. Environmental stress positively predicted emotional, dire, compliant, and anonymous prosocial behaviors and negatively predicted altruistic prosocial behaviors. Discussion will focus on the differential relations among language stress, environmental stress and specific prosocial behaviors and the implications of these findings for measurement and future research.

*Keywords:* acculturative stress, prosocial behaviors, environmental stress

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## Introduction

Scholars generally assert that stress has negative consequences for individuals' social behaviors. Stressful experiences can be demanding, weakening coping mechanisms and leading to maladjustment (Conger et al., 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress, however, is not always associated with negative outcomes. Moderate stress experiences can be adaptive, especially if the individual perceives the stress as a challenge as opposed to a threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressful experiences have been conceptually linked with prosocial behaviors (i.e., actions intended to benefit others; Carlo & Randall, 2002), including altruistic helping (helping at a cost to one's self). For example, "altruism born of suffering" is a concept that suggests that stressful events might foster emotional sensitivity and promote empathy and compassion, and ultimately promote altruistic and helping behaviors (Staub, 1997). However, direct research evidence on this possibility is lacking. Nonetheless, stress is an important predictor of adjustment and positive development for emerging adults and should be considered a complex construct that may impact social behaviors in nuanced ways (Conger et al., 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Staub, 1997).

Mexican Americans face unique forms of stressors, including acculturative stress. Acculturative stress is defined as stress associated with demands placed on the individual that result from adapting to a new culture (Alegria & Woo, 2009). Acculturative stress is multidimensional and can be conceptualized in different ways. Two dimensions of acculturative stress are language and environmental stress (Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987). Language is a salient component of everyday life

and may contribute to acculturative stress among Mexican Americans. Specifically, language can be potentially stressful for emerging adults who speak English as a second language and have difficulty understanding or communicating with others (Mena et al., 1987). Additionally, emerging adults may feel that they have access to fewer opportunities, such as limited access to education and job opportunities, than their European American peers because of their ethnic minority status. They may also feel that they are socially excluded because of their ethnicity. Emerging adults who believe that society excludes them based on their ethnicity may experience environmental stress, another dimension of acculturative stress (Mena et al., 1987). Acculturative stress has been empirically linked to a variety of behavioral outcomes, including prosocial behaviors (McGinley et al., 2010).

Despite the suggestive evidence of the relevance of acculturative stress to prosocial behaviors, there are several limitations in this research. First, the majority of the research examines acculturative stress as a unidimensional construct (see McGinley et al., 2010). One study that examined different dimensions of acculturative stress found that the dimensions differentially impacted self-esteem (Wang, Schwartz, & Zamboanga, 2010). This latter study provides initial support for examining acculturative stress as a multidimensional construct. Second, prosocial behaviors have also been mostly examined as a unidimensional construct rather than a multidimensional construct that consists of different types of prosocial behaviors (see Carlo & Randall, 2002). Several researchers have previously demonstrated differential relations between forms of prosocial behaviors and a variety of constructs among Latino youth including acculturative stress (McGinley et al., 2010),

parental discipline (Carlo, Knight, McGinley, & Hayes, 2011a) and sympathy (Carlo, Mestre, Samper, Tur, & Armenta, 2011b). Therefore, it is important to examine the influence of specific dimensions of acculturative stress on different types of prosocial behaviors in order to capture the complexity of the relations.

Recent research also suggests that prosocial behaviors are complex and multidimensional and should not be examined as a unidimensional construct. Carlo and Randall (2002) identified types of prosocial behaviors in adolescents. The Prosocial Tendencies Measure (PTM) was developed based on theory and prior research and was administered to a sample of college students (Carlo & Randall, 2002), yielding six subscales of unique types of prosocial behaviors: altruistic, public, anonymous, emotional, dire, and compliant prosocial behaviors. Altruistic behaviors are actions that benefit others with no expected gain to the self. Helping behaviors done in the presence of others are referred to as public prosocial behaviors. Anonymous behaviors include actions conducted without the knowledge of others. Emotional prosocial behaviors are expressed in emotionally evocative situations, such as comforting another. Dire prosocial behaviors refer to helping in crisis situations. Finally, compliant prosocial behaviors include helping when directed, such as helping the family when asked (Carlo & Randall, 2002).

There is limited, mixed evidence on the associations between acculturative stress and prosocial behaviors. One study found no association between acculturative stress and early adolescents' global prosocial behaviors (Schwartz et al., 2007). Another study found that acculturative stress is positively associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors in Mexican American early adolescents, but negatively associated with other forms (McGinley et al., 2010). However, it is unclear if specific dimensions of acculturative stress differentially impact different forms of prosocial behaviors. The present study was designed to examine these relations in a sample of Mexican American college students in the United States. Specifically, the present study investigated whether language and environmental stressors are

related to specific forms of prosocial behaviors.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 148 Mexican American college students (mean age=23.05 years, range 18-30 years; SD = 3.33; 66.9% female). Data were collected from Mexican American college students in state universities in California and Texas.

### Measures

**Acculturative stress.** Participants completed self-reported measures of their acculturative stress (Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale; Mena et al., 1987). For the current study, the environmental stress subscale was used to assess stress associated with perceptions of limited opportunities and social exclusion (10 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ , sample item: "*I have more barriers to overcome than most people*").

A language stress subscale was created to assess stress associated with communication (3 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ , sample item: "*It bothers me that I have an accent*").

**Prosocial behaviors.** Students also reported on their tendency to engage in six common types of prosocial behaviors (dire, emotional, anonymous, altruistic, public, and compliant; Carlo et al., 2003). Dire prosocial behaviors include helping others in emergency situations (3 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ , sample item: "*I tend to help people who are in real crisis or need*"). Emotional prosocial behaviors include any helping behaviors in emotionally evocative situations (4 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ , sample item: "*It makes me feel good when I can comfort someone who is really upset*"). Compliant behaviors include obeying orders and following directions (2 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ , sample item: "*I never wait to help others when they ask for it*"). Anonymous prosocial tendencies include helping without being identified (4 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ , sample item: "*I prefer to donate money without anyone knowing*").

Public prosocial tendencies include helping behaviors in the presence of others (4 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ , sample item: "*When other people are around, it is easier for me to help others in need*"). Altruistic prosocial tendencies refer to helping others when there is no benefit to the self (3 items, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76$  reversed-scored sample item, "*I believe I should receive more rewards for the time and energy I spend on volunteer service*").

## Results

A series of multiple regressions were conducted to examine the associations among language and environmental stress and six types of prosocial behaviors. For each form of prosocial behavior, language and environmental stress were entered as predictors. The results demonstrated that language stress negatively predicted compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial behaviors (see Table 1). In contrast, environmental stress positively predicted emotional, dire, compliant, and anonymous prosocial behaviors.

## Discussion

Overall, findings suggest that language and environmental stress were differentially associated with prosocial behaviors in Mexican American emerging adults. The findings demonstrate that different forms of stressors are associated with specific forms of prosocial behaviors. Moreover, language stress was negatively related to prosocial behaviors, but environmental stress was positively related to prosocial behaviors. These findings suggest that some, but not all, forms of acculturative stress are debilitating to Mexican American college students.

As might be expected based on traditional theories of stress and maladjustment, language stress was negatively associated with compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial behaviors. These findings suggest that the stress associated with language difficulties (perhaps including their accent) may reflect higher risk for prosocial functioning among Mexican American college students. Perhaps the stress associated

with language use might lead to avoidance in prosocial behavior opportunities that entail emotionally evocative and emergency situations. Furthermore, when asked to help (i.e., compliant), Mexican American college students who experience language stress may feel less confident (i.e., efficacy) to respond and/or communicate appropriately. Thus, language-associated stress might reflect a more general inclination to keep to themselves and avoid social interactions, which may lead to less helping in those situations.

The stark contrast in relations between environmental stress and prosocial behaviors was interesting. Specifically, environmental stress was positively associated with emotional, dire, compliant, and anonymous prosocial behaviors. These findings suggest that environmental stress, in contrast to language stress, has beneficial behavioral consequences. The findings in general (except for altruistic helping) were consistent with the findings of McGinley and colleagues (2010), though these prior researchers used a global measure of acculturative stress. There are several possible explanations for these positive relations. One possibility is that environmental stress is not as intense and demanding as language-associated stress. Alternatively, prosocial behaviors might be effective in dealing with environmental stress, thus serving as an effective coping mechanism. Clearly, the findings demonstrate the importance of examining different forms of acculturative stress and suggest that not all forms are debilitating.

There were several limitations to the present study. First, the study used a correlation design thereby limiting our ability to infer direction of causal relations. Longitudinal and experimental designs are necessary to discern such relations. Second, only self-report instruments were used. Future research utilizing multiple methods (e.g., observations, different reporters) is needed to minimize potential self-presentational demands and shared method variance. Finally, research on more general, and more representative, samples of Mexican Americans and other Latino/as are needed to better generalize the findings.

Despite these limitations, the present findings illustrate the importance of examining both accul-

turative stress and prosocial behaviors as distinct and multidimensional constructs. These results can inform previous theories of prosocial development and stress as they contribute to the understanding of the complexity of the relations between these behaviors. These findings may also inform program developers and policymakers regarding the experiences of Mexican American college students, and how stress associated with language and perceptions of environmental barriers influences their helping behaviors.

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**Table 1.** Summary of Regression analysis: Language and environmental stress predicting public, altruistic, anonymous, compliant, emotional, and dire prosocial behaviors.

Variable	Public			Altruistic			Anonymous			Compliant			Emotional			Dire		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
Constant	1.72	.24		4.59	.23		1.73	.25		3.29	.29		2.87	.25		2.72	.25	
Language	.15	.11	.14	-.15	.11	-.15	.20	.12	.18	-.40	.13	-.30**	-.31	.12	-.27**	-.20	.12	-.18*
Social	-.01	.13	-.01	-.22	.12	-.19	.29	.13	.22*	.46	1.5	.31**	.50	.13	.38**	.38	.13	.30**

Note: \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01.

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